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If Your Love Were A Grain Of Sand Mine Would Be A Universe Of Beaches

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IF YOUR LOVE WERE A GRAIN OF SAND, MINE WOULD BE A UNIVERSE OF
BEACHES

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master's of
Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

VALERIE MOLNAR
Bachelor's of Fine Art, Cleveland Institute of Art, 2006

Director: BARBARA TISSERAT
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, PAINTING AND PRINTMAKING

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2008

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Thank you to my all of Family for your immeasurable amounts of support, encouragement, and faith in me. I couldn't have done it without you.

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Abstract

IF YOUR LOVE WERE A GRAIN OF SAND, MINE WOULD BE A UNIVERSE OF BEACHES

By Valerie Molnar MFA

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2008

Major Director: Barbara Tisserat
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, PAINTING AND PRINTMAKING

(An Updated and Extensive Progress Report)

Each stitch is a piece of me that I give, a moment of my life and a unit of my love,
meticulously culminated into a universal visual language. The optimist in me knits for the
cause, while my formalist counterpart works to make the images that sell my thoughts.

I knit for the lovers.

I make these objects as a practice and a confirmation of my optimism. I make these
images to communicate and persuade as a serious contender while at the same time
retaining my own optimism and sanity by promising to never take myself too seriously.



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Persistent Themes and Concepts

Stitches as increments of love

This is an idea that has been there with me since the beginning, my feelings about this haven't evolved much because I believe that it is an understood and universal established idea that I appropriate for my needs. This is an idea that I don't aim to reinterpret or redefine, but to reestablish and reprioritize.

Each stitch is a token of my affection, or a symbol for every handcrafter's devotion and sincerity. I still knit every stitch by hand although my fingers and hands ache, each movement is a proclamation of faith, a tangible piece of my emotion. It's not a critique of popular culture and mass production; it's a celebration of handcrafters around the world, and their ability to survive through tradition or hobby fads. The fact that it's quicker easier and cheaper to go out and buy a scarf, than it is to go pick out the perfect yarn combo for about three times the price, and sit and make the thing one centimeter at a time taking hours and days rather than one outing to the mall, is indisputable evidence that it is either a scientific miracle that human emotion can be cultivated into a tangible object, or that it is so universally understood that each stitch is a representation of one unit of the emotion Love. Either way, it feels like a miracle.

This miracle is often taken for granted and my work is a tribute and affirmation of my appreciation for the phenomenon.

Sinsrony and the Sinsronic* (Term coined by Jess Langley)



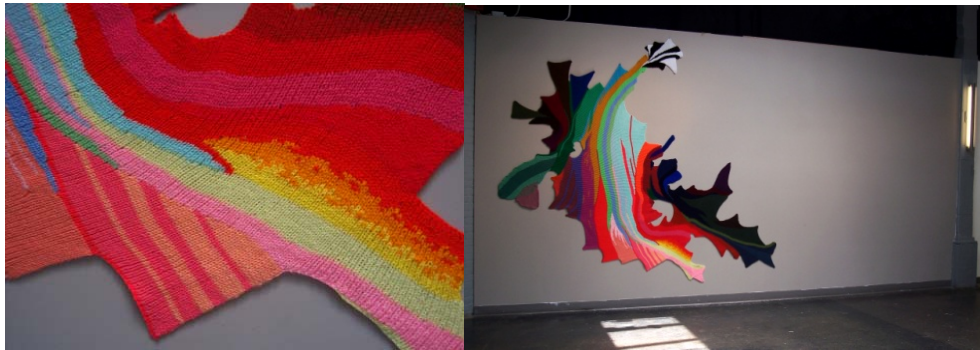
I was talking with Jess Langley one morning about this excitement we share, along with a lot of people, about that ideal balance between being sincere and ironic. I had been spouting off to her about how once that balance is found it becomes a whole new animal, neither really sincere nor ironic; therefore it was feeling wrong to use either of those words in describing the new breed. Jess had even already thought of that part as well- she had coined the term sinsronic, or sinsrony, but I feel like even meshing the two together doesn't separate it enough from what it actually comes to be when the two are mixed in that way.

It's like when blue and yellow mix, they make green, not blellow, even though it's understood that those two things are what make green, they are not in essence what green actually is. Green is green. In turn as well, it has to be the perfect mix to make green, if there is one outweighing the other it becomes blue-green or yellow-green, again making note of what has made it, while even putting the old thing in front of the new mixture name, just as you cannot have either irony or sincerity outweighing one or the other, or else the one that outweighs automatically becomes what it is, with the other simply being a compliment. I haven't yet figured out what I want it to be named, just

making up a word doesn't seem serious enough- but this is important to me and I will wait until the perfect term is found.

The Princess Bride is the ultimate movie/book for this term. It is a perfect fit in its quirky ability to be serious and not serious at the same time, or not serious about its seriousness while amazingly not being insincere. (the best thing about 'sinsronic' is its ability to be mysterious in a way that it is difficult to exactly dissect how things become 'sinsronic') It's a love story action adventure, and a comedy, but it's not a satire of an action adventure love story- and it's not that it isn't serious about the love and the action, or that it isn't deep, and it's not distasteful, it just somehow retains an air of amazing lightheartedness. The titles that I choose come from the book/movie and are meant to be in the same attitude. The titles, phrases taken directly from the movie or book, work in the same way on a smaller scale. *Welcome To The Pit of Despair, Is This A Kissing Book?*, have an immediate air of being about something serious- danger or love- but the way the phrase is constructed, there is a bit of facetiousness built in. Whether the viewer is aware that the titles are coming from the movie or not, they already feel 'sinsronic' on their own. However, if the source is known, it only further supports the notion that the work should be taken sinsronically. The titles aren't just meant to reference a movie that I love and watch while I am making, they are designed to give the viewer a specific psychological context in which to analyze the work.

Object vs. Image



Detail of *Count Tyrone Rugen's Run*, and *Count Tyrone Rugen's Run*

The greater distance from which the piece is viewed, the piece is viewed the smaller the stitch appears. So the larger the piece the farther away it can be and still have visual impact. The farther away that is able to happen the smaller each stitch becomes; as soon as the stitch becomes small enough to be overlooked, it becomes an image. At the same time, the closer the viewer's proximity, the less apparent the image as a whole is, and it's the texture of the fabric and the amount of stitches and the quality of the stitches that take the lead.

Viewer based flux

The object image read also fluctuates not only by physical proximity to the viewer, but the viewer's personal background. People who do not come from an artistic background tend to have a bias toward seeing the object, they find it more satisfying and easier to relate to as a knitted object, and it is more difficult for them to appreciate or find the image.



Detail of *Is This A Kissing Book?*

Viewer based flux also depends on proximity. At a distance, the viewer is dealing with a formal composition of colors which they either can appreciate or not due to personal taste. However the images I create are designed to be also appreciated on a wide spectrum. I use bright seductive colors and organic shapes that are easily relatable and appreciated. It's important to me that the images are beautiful and seductive as visual bait or eye candy for the viewer. I intentionally them in, to lure them closer for the second experience. Upon close approach the stitches become larger as the ability to perceive the whole image fades, and the friendly familiar texture directs the viewer to the social implications of the process.

Stitches as Markers of Time



Dead Into The Fire Swamp 2007

I am able to multitask with ease. The trouble is, finding a ‘second task’ that will allow me to sit still. The ultimate combo has become, knitting for my hands, *The Princess Bride* for my eyes and ears, and a cup of tea for my mouth- all parts satisfied, nothing restless. Although at the end of the day, each day, day in and day out, I feel bad for sitting watching the same movie over and over again, regardless of how much knitting I get done. With this black and white piece *Dead Into The Fire Swamp* I used only black yarn and white yarn so I could be mobile and see things and go places while working. Since my process allows me this luxury I decided to take advantage of it to widen my horizons.... So each section represents a different place, each stitch was simultaneously made while being at the ocean or being in New York, each stitch represented a second of my life. But, the travels didn’t really reveal itself in the work, other than it only being black and white. I thought of maps, or titles, and I put all the places I went to in the materials section of the label, but nothing was really satisfying. I

also tried dipping my hands in paint and knitting until my hands were clean, the result showing a timeline of goopy hands to clean hands. I couldn't handle the paint on the yarn, it was gross, and this was a testament that I do really need them to look the way they do. Although my current endeavor isn't to make this aspect of timeline visually pronounced, it still is something that I am constantly thinking of while I am making.

Black and White



Black and white stripes have become a very important aspect of my work. Although they have been a formal element for about a year and a half, it's not until recently that I have felt or recognized its weight. Black and white is ultimate. It is the color combination with the most amount of contrast, the most amount of impact. The bars and the contrast conjure organization and order; it is the first block and the last block of every color spectrum. Placed next to unruly colors and unruly shapes the black and white grounds and amplifies.

A Short Story about How My Work has Physically Evolved

I first started knitting as a reaction to how I felt while I was painting. The pressure of the white rectangle -- having an idea great enough to execute, having the execution be as great as the idea didn't just seem impossible, it smelt tasted and felt impossible.



I started with needles that were one foot long with about six feet of stitches, so I would not be able to see what was happening while I was working. This was also the first time I was able to make something abstract -- before I had never felt I was at a level to be able to work abstractly. Coming straight to the studio after art history class made me feel smaller than a spec -- my formal abilities, my concepts, even trying to have

confidence in my potential seemed irrelevant and ridiculous. But, with knitting I didn't have to think of all that for some reason. I was able to just work, and be happy working.

The first piece I made was designed to be hung over the couch to be appreciated visually, then to be taken down and used as a blanket to be loved. Although the functionality was no longer a part of the work after that first piece, the material and process alone point to the ideas of love I want to convey. My early process was spontaneous blind and free, I allowed myself to use any material, stitch or color that struck my mood at any moment. There was no editing, I never cut out mistakes or unwove a color I decided was wrong. I just kept moving forward. I was not concerned with the overall composition.

After a period of working with hardly any parameters I started developing strong feelings in the pit of my stomach as to what I wanted the pieces to become. These feelings had no words for a long time, and I tried to ignore them for a while. I didn't want the focus to be on the yarn anymore, I didn't want it to be on the form; I didn't want tricks or my knitting skills and knowledge of stitches to be what was interesting. I wanted my choices in composition and color, choices and ideas that could be translated into many genres and languages – drawing, painting, craft, sculpture, to be what was important. I was weeding through not only visual aspects, but also the ideas behind my process. What was important to me in knitting was the love, the transfer of love, not the ability to keep necks and fingers warm, or the hobby of collecting types of stitches, or making unique objects from novelty yarns, or aestheticising tissue boxes. There were

some things to be sorted through and thrown out, and others to be championed. Then I found words to my feelings...

I had these feelings for quite some time before I learned to trust them and listen. They were there nagging, but muffled, I couldn't understand them, until I found Clement Greenberg's Modernism essay- it put words to every gut feeling I was having, it was like Christmas. I still get goose bumps when I read it.

Firstly, just the way it happened, oh so romantic. Greenberg had a vision of the way things needed to be done, like a revelation, some ultimate immaculate conception of his ideas, then his preaching and his followers... so bizarre and so amazing. I want to buy into his ideas of flatness leading to purification even more because of the way he believed, and the way so many others believed. I started taking out things that I thought clouded more important ideas, using him as a model. It was such an amazing feeling, like tons of weight off my shoulders; I'll always have to be grateful for that.

(One more thing on Greenberg, then I'll quit I swear... I just want to make a defense argument against one comment that I often hear, which is, "if Greenberg could see what you're doing with his ideas, he would be spinning in his grave" Maybe he would, but that is not how I think of it. I love him so much, I would never do anything I think would piss him off- here is how I think of it... he made this process of 'purification' and Saul Ostrow wrote a wonderful definition of Greenberg's 'purification' for me, which is "The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Thus would each art be

rendered "pure," and in its "purity" find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. "Purity" meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance. " So, if we spent time going around 'purifying' things one at a time, "entrenching things more firmly in their areas of competence," like knitting, or burrito making, or mountain climbing, we could be finding way to communicate more immediately more universally with many things, not just art. It wouldn't be discrediting the 'purification' of painting, or making that less important, we would just be using his template to find the same kinds of universal language in many things. Saul uses the term 'discipline' in place of art, I think we could replace 'discipline' with many things. Ok ok ok, not that I believe that would ever work, but, I do believe it is a beautiful idea, and I like believing that I am doing my part by 'purifying' knitting.)

So then I had my template, my platform to jump off. After boiling things down and simplifying it was time to start building up. I needed a way to own the work, to make them come from ME. Up until this point, I would knit knit knit, then pin it to the wall, and walk away. Not only was seeing them hung anticlimactic in action, I had an emotional disjoint with the work. It was hard for me to even look at them, they didn't feel like anything I would ever have made, and they surprised me every time. The surprise was nice for a moment, but then it never went away, I could never recognize them or connect with them. Eventually they would come off the wall, and I wouldn't have to be uncomfortable in that way until the next time.

So, after struggling with, coming to terms with, finding exactly what it was about what I wanted the pieces to be, I needed to find a reason for the way they looked. Which

I would say is my current endeavor. Fall of 2006 I started making small pieces, which allowed me to see what I was knitting while I was knitting. This does not go to say I was considering my composition, I was just able to see the composition, which I'm sure made me consider it to a point, but it was still not at the forefront of my mind. I was still trying to be carefree and spontaneous with color choices and formations.



Number Five 2006

Then, I made more small pieces that could operate as a whole which forced me to compose them into an image on the wall, it gave me a way to interact with them, to have a conversation with them after the knitting process. But I was terrible at composing the pieces, the whole reason I stopped painting in the first place. I don't even have a photo for visual support for this section, that's how bad the results were. With that either not being enough, or me not being fluent and able to thrive this way at that moment, I looked for another answer and started painting on the wall.



The painted element went from backdrop



design. It was the first experiment that really gave me a way to react and interact with the knitting. I painted the same way I knitted, picked something I knew I wanted in a section and painted, then stopped and found another section I wanted and painted and stopped and so on. I never painted over something I didn't like. It was fun. There were some problems: it became to look like a poor substitute for what could have been knitting. I liked that it was different, and that it was image playing with an object that made an image, but the paint wasn't good enough and whatever was painted just could have been knitted.... I'm not sure if I believe it wasn't good enough, or maybe my patience with taping and painting was the problem (not the paint, but my skills in graphic painting). Over the summer of 2007, I made a small knitted piece and spent two months reacting to it with paint on the wall.



I enjoyed spending time with it; I enjoy looking at it still. But I would never reproduce this work even though it isn't necessarily site specific. It was of that place and of that time and I took my time reacting and deciding- reproducing it would cheapen that

experience and be dishonest. Knowing that having a similar circumstance (two interrupted months to install) is rare, I have to believe that painting on the wall with the knitting is a more private interaction, like working in a sketchbook, and is not my ultimate solution to having a responsible relationship with the pieces.



They're Kissing Again 2008

This brings us up to date. With painting on the wall taking a hiatus, I've come back to knitting small pieces that make up a whole. But I am equipped with a new direction and goal, whereas before I had no direction or goal other than making small pieces into a whole. The new element is the attention to architecture. Before now, the images I created floated on a white wall that was not to be considered, by myself or the viewer- the images floated on a pretend plane, like paintings. Recently, I started ever so slightly mentioning that I know and appreciate where the wall meets the floor, where the walls come together, where the ceiling meets the wall. Not huge revelations, just little

props. Things are starting at the floor, where the ground is the ground, both for the image and for the viewer. Sometimes they stretch to the ceiling or reach for the other walls.

Although I am moving toward an installation base, I don't want to entirely leave behind image. I want both image/object and environment; for the images to understand the architecture instead of ignore it - not physically making a new environment but visually enhancing what is already there.

I also want the pieces to appear to have purpose, not a functional purpose, but to be doing something of their own. They can be talking with one another, or growing, or falling; narratives that can be as simple as one word or one sentence, even flexible enough to be different stories for different people. But it's another goal, or mental sketch for me to have to work towards. I am slowly, with these devices, gaining credibility and responsibility for my image making; I no longer have to chalk it up to chance and spontaneity.

Artistic Influences



Jim Lambie

Jim Lambie is one of the artists that inspired me to consider architecture. He makes visually overwhelming environment without lots of objects or obstacles (obstacles in terms of viewers needing to investigate around or come to terms with form before being able to see the installation as an image) as an experience instead of a thing. It's not like a fort or a simulated space or a new environment, he uses color to enhance what's already there making people notice the building for what it is while interjecting his psychedelia. I like that. So simple, so almost subtle, but not subtle at all.



Elana Herzog

Elana Herzog is another influence in that way. Instead of just putting work inside a space, she uses the architecture as an element for her work- or she makes note of the space and uses it to her advantage, while also seemingly giving ‘props’ to the space for being what it is. She doesn’t alter the space, she uses it. In her using the space the best she can, surprises happen. Just like in Jim Lambie’s projects- in his it’s a surprise to find out the patterns come from the floorboards- she puts little traces of her work in unexpected places, like on a pillar in the middle of the floor- instead of pretending that the pillar isn’t there, she places a little surprise to remind people that it is there. Her piece comes alive, taking over the room, spreading like a plant or disease. Which makes it feel like an environment, when it doesn’t necessarily need to be.



Joseph Albers

Another guy who pulls at my heart strings by making magic out of simplicity. Not a complicated pattern not outrageous colors or shapes or form, just beautiful and graceful simplicity. And being clever without being too clever. Magic.



Mike Kelley

He is probably my ultimate all time favorite. His *More Hours Of Love Than Can Ever Be Repaid and The Wages Of Sin* has always been a cornerstone to a way I think about my work, or the words I use to describe my feelings about what I make. His ideas about friendly familiar objects representing what it means to spend time on behalf of another helped me verbalize in the beginning why I wanted to knit.



Frank Stella

I have undying love for Frank Stella's Protractor series and the entire surrounding Greenberg phenomenon. It was my whole world, not anymore, but I think it will probably always be there whether or not it remains visible in my work. Stella's clean systematic composition of colors that borders on optical illusion, and plays with warm and cool and figure ground reversal feel timeless.



p.s. I took this detail of my work one year before I read Greenberg or saw this Stella detail, isn't it crazy?!? Some of the pinks and blues and browns are even in the same spots. I think we're soulmates.

People like **Jim Drain, Jim Hodges, Jen Stark , Portia Munson, Mindy Shapero, Jane Gillings,** and **Sophie Zezmer** are inspirations for all the obvious reasons. I enjoy visual pleasure. I am excited about their simple materials and complex images and big ideas. Overwhelming beauty grace obsessiveness compulsiveness intelligence. Bright. Colorful. Wonderful.

In Conclusion

The title of this thesis, the title of the culmination of these two years, is also taken from *The Princess Bride* yet is just a bit different from the rest. All previous titles have been taken from the movie. This one is from the book and doesn't quite share the same attitude as the rest. I was at first very nervous about this being the wrong choice, being scared that it was too serious. But now I feel it is perfect for the changing times as a gate from my past to my future. This quote is how Wesley begins to describe to Buttercup his love for her, and he uses grains of sand for an analogy for units of love. He is describing the amount of his love via universal understood units, so that others can understand his feelings.

The slight seriousness doesn't bother me because his idea is something I so closely prescribe to and understand and commiserate with. And mostly because it's something I remain serious about as well. Naming my thesis this pulls that idea outside of my work, and gives me a chance to see it on its own.

I don't believe that there isn't enough love in the world; I believe that love is an entity that exists in the world as a plentiful and imperishable body waiting to be harnessed by anyone who has the will. So far, this is how I've harnessed mine, using this process of knitting as evidence of love's existence.

For my future, I am excited; I feel ready. Wherever my future may bring me I promise to keep my harness ready.